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AUTHOR Fuller, Howard L.

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the struggle of African Americans for more educational options (a battle also faced by other racial and ethnic groups). The debate is about who should have the primary power to determine where low-income, mostly African American students should attend school. The fundamental problem is that parents without the power to make educational choices lack an indispensable tool for helping their children secure an effective education. The paper reviews the struggle of African Americans for expanded educational opportunity; defines the educational crisis facing African Americans, who increasingly see the existing system of public schools as failing their children; and explains the double standard of those who value their own power to make educational choices but diminish its importance for low-income parents. It also uses Milwaukee's experience since 1976 with forced choice and since 1990 with real choice to describe how programs supposedly meant to expand choices for African Americans in fact denied them real choice and how tax-supported education vouchers have given real choice to thousands of low-income, predominantly African American families. The paper summarizes distortions that voucher opponents use to discredit this option. (Contains 40 references.) (SM)

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THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FOR THE POWER TO MAKE REAL EDUCATIONAL CHOICES

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H. Fuller

PROFESSOR HOWARD L. FULLER, PH.D.
FOUNDER & DIRECTOR
INSTITUTE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF LEARNING
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

PRESENTED AT SECOND ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM
ON EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS
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INTRODUCTION

Amidst a multitude of claims and counterclaims, Milwaukee mother Valerie Johnson cuts to the heart of the national school choice debate in less than half a minute:

> **"The main aspirations I have for my children have always been that they would do the best that they could do and be whatever they wanted.**
>
> **"I've tried to instill into them that education is really, really important.**
>
> **"The school choice issue is not about public versus private. It's about choice. It's about me knowing what works well for my family and me being able to make that choice for them."**
>
> **"If you take away our choice I believe you're taking away the children's chance.**
>
> **"I think I know what's best for my children. Yes, I do."**

Despite the unambiguous power and clarity of her words, a deep canyon divides America when it comes to educational choice. On one side, with a narrow range of options, are low-income parents, mostly of color. On the other side, with a much broader array of choices, are middle- and upper-income, mostly white parents.

Valerie Johnson and Family

While this paper is about the struggle of African Americans for more educational options, other racial and ethnic groups are waging the same fight. The shared experience of African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and others explains the growing national push to give low-income parents more educational options. These include tax-supported education vouchers, tax credits and deductions, charter schools, public-private partnerships, and other educational options that are more accountable to low-income, historically disenfranchised parents.

Vouchers are clearly among the most controversial options. Currently, they let some low-income, mostly African American parents in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida send their children to private schools, including religious schools. According to Indiana University Professor Martha M. McCarthy, "No [education] topic is generating more volatile debate…than voucher systems to fund schooling" (2000).

For many, the voucher debate is highly nuanced, often featuring arcane discussion of scholarly methodology. But, with all respect, that is not what this debate **really** is about.

This is a debate about power. This is about who should have the primary power to determine where low-income, mostly African American children attend school. This is about whether parents of low-income African American children should obtain a power that many critics of the choice movement exercise every day **on behalf of their own children.** This is about a fundamental issue confronting African Americans and therefore all Americans: parents without the power to make educational choices lack an indispensable tool for helping their children secure an effective education.

Momentous political and legal developments will determine the direction this debate takes.

- This year and in years to come, elections at the local, state, and national level will feature candidates with very different views on whether low-income parents should have real power in choosing schools for their children.
- Eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court will decide if vouchers are available to low-income parents in their enduring quest to realize the educational aspirations that they have for their children.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS PAPER

This paper reviews the struggle of African Americans for expanded educational opportunity.

- It defines the educational crisis facing African Americans, who increasingly see **the existing system of public schools** as failing their children.

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- It explains the unconscionable double standard of those who value **their own power** to make educational choices, but diminish its importance for low-income, mostly African American parents.
- Using Milwaukee's experience since 1976 with "forced choice" and, since 1990, with real choice, it describes:
  - how programs supposedly meant to expand choices for African Americans in fact denied them real choice; and
  - how tax-supported education vouchers have given real choice to thousands of low-income families, most of whom are African American.
- It summarizes distortions that voucher opponents use to discredit this option. Milwaukee's experience shows how dishonesty is a hallmark of the historical and current effort to deny expanded educational choices to these parents.

THE CORE ISSUE

Here is the central question confronting elected officials, the Supreme Court, and, indeed, the citizens of America:

SHOULD LOW-INCOME, MOSTLY AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS RECEIVE VOUCHERS THAT WILL EMPOWER THEM TO MAKE EDUCATIONAL CHOICES THAT A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BOTH CHERISH AND TAKE FOR GRANTED? [1]

While any answer but "**YES**" is unacceptable, powerful forces want the Supreme Court to say "**NO**." These forces now have key roles in deciding where large numbers of low-income, mostly African American children attend school. They do not want to surrender that power. They have committed substantial energy and resources to keep it. The status quo is very important to them.

For example, the two largest teachers' unions — the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) — strongly oppose giving African American parents more power to choose their children's schools.

The NEA draws a clear line in the sand. Asked if there was "any circumstance" where he could support vouchers linked to higher public school spending, NEA President Robert Chase told writer Matthew Miller: "**No**." Miller asked: "Double school spending in inner cities?" Chase: "**No**." Miller, again: "Triple it, but give them a voucher?" Chase: "**No**." (Miller, 1999). Confirming this, the NEA's Office of Public Education Advocacy declares: "**On some issues, like vouchers, there's no room for compromise**." (Steffens, 1999).

For African Americans, the stakes are huge. If opponents of providing low-income, mostly African American parents with more educational power prevail, historical obstacles to advancement will be even more entrenched. *This current struggle is one we cannot lose.*

THE CRISIS

Critical problems in urban America will worsen unless young African American men and women gain a quality education. This is not happening now. Reflecting a pattern evident in many cities, **most African American high school freshmen in Milwaukee do not graduate four years later**. This staggering fact is reinforced by national data showing that African Americans as a group perform well below national norms. Professor Lawrence Stedman described the distressing situation at a Brookings Institution conference:

> "...[Twelfth] grade black students are performing at the level of middle school white students. These students are about to graduate, yet they lag four or more years behind in every area [including] reading, math, science, writing, history, and geography. Latino seniors do somewhat better...in math and writing but, in the other areas, are also four years behind white 12th graders...[R]acial gaps in achievement...are as large or larger than they were a decade ago...The conclusion is distressing but unavoidable...[A] generation has passed and the achievement of educational equality remains an elusive dream. Schools and society remain divided into two different worlds, one black and one white, separate and unequal." (Stedman, 1997)

More recent data, from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), confirm the continuing achievement gap between white students and African Americans. In reading, math, and science, whites are much more likely than African Americans to score at "proficient" or "advanced" levels. Just consider that in math, where

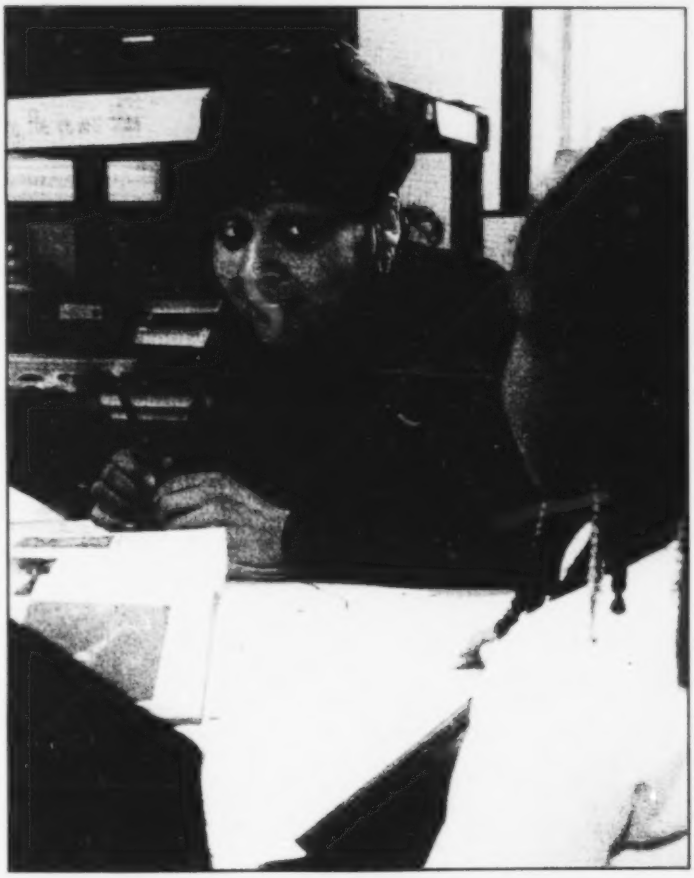
the percentile gap between African Americans and whites is **closest**. 18% of whites scored proficient, while only 4% of African Americans did. This 14-point gap compares to a 23-point gap in reading and a 20-point gap in science (The College Board, 1999).

This crisis is all too apparent to African Americans, many of whom believe public schools are failing their children. According to a recent authoritative survey, "black respondents...rated their local public schools more negatively [in 1999 than in 1998], and a larger percentage...believe their local public schools are getting worse." The same survey found that "whites reported fairly high levels of satisfaction with their local public schools, and they are more likely to think the schools are improving than regressing" (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1999).

The disparity in African American and white opinion arises, in part, because more African Americans are disenfranchised when it comes to the power to choose the best educational options for their children. The *unacceptable conditions* described by Stedman and The College Board will not change unless African Americans seek and get the power to make educational choices, a power taken for granted by most white parents. Without that power, African Americans are disarmed when it comes to holding educators accountable for providing an effective education to their children.

THE DOUBLE STANDARD

A misleading and repugnant double standard contaminates the public debate about parent school choice. This double standard reflects the false idea that parental choice is a new or untested concept. **It is not. The power to make educational choices is widespread, long-standing, and highly valued — by those who have it.**



Here are three examples of the double standard (emphasis added). The Education Commission of the States calls school choice "one of the fastest-growing **innovations** in public education" (ECS, 1999). Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) says that while "[e]nthusiasm [for choice] continues to grow...little is known empirically about the effects of [this] **policy experiment**..." (Fuller, B., et.al., 1998). A PACE newsletter says "...the school choice movement has blossomed [and] in many communities parents **now** can choose from one or more alternatives to traditional public schools..." (1999).

The implication is that the "newness" of parental choice requires that it be pursued cautiously. It must be "studied." It must be "carefully evaluated." And on, and on.

There is nothing wrong with thorough studies. More information is better than less. But these studies must not proceed on the false assumption that the power to make educational choices is new. **All** that's new is that a small number of low-income parents **finally** have won power that middle- and upper-income parents long have taken for granted.

It is thus outrageous to use "newness" as an excuse for denying low-income parents an opportunity so widely used and valued by others. **Doing so forces low-income parents to claw and scrape for the basic right to make decisions about what school their children attend**. At each step, they confront opponents who say "more studies" are needed to see if choice "really works." Others say tax-supported choice for low-income parents should only be allowed if schools they select follow a barrage of new rules, to assure "accountability." The singular importance of *accountability to parents*, so valued by more affluent families, is condescendingly dismissed when it comes to low-income African American parents.

THE MILWAUKEE EXPERIENCE

Milwaukee's experience illustrates the struggle of African Americans for power in making educational choices.

In January 1976, a federal judge said that Milwaukee's African American children were unlawfully confined in segregated schools. The Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) responded with a plan that has since governed pupil assignment for most African Americans. It **consciously** gave the best choices primarily to middle- and upper-income, mostly white parents. It **consciously** uprooted a disproportionate number of low-income, mostly African American children and assigned them to distant schools (Fuller, 1985).

To its proponents, this forced busing, i.e., forced choice, plan "worked." Most MPS schools became racially desegregated (Mitchell, 1989). Milwaukee's political and civic leaders binged on self-congratulation. The media celebrated the "peacefulness" of the process, trumpeting MPS claims (later identified as false, see below) that most students were "at or above average" in test scores. Opponents were marginalized as racists and/or racial separatists. That charge, while true for some, became a means for dismissing any criticism.

There was widespread denial about how the process actually worked. To this day, much of the public has been shielded from a full understanding of how forced busing operates. Figure 1, next page, depicts busing in 1987-88 from Milwaukee's largely African American Auer Avenue School neighborhood. *It is representative of how two generations of African American children have been forced to travel between one and two hours a day to schools outside their neighborhood.* In the Auer Avenue example, 1,071 students — two-thirds of all elementary age children in that area — were transported to 97 different schools in 1987-88.

While such **forced** "choices" were advanced in the name of helping African Americans, multiple studies document the transportation burden placed on these students and their failure to attain satisfactory levels of academic achievement (Fuller, 1985; Study Commission on the Quality of Education in the Metropolitan Milwaukee Public Schools, 1985; Murphy, 1986; Norquist, 1988; Mitchell, 1989). Fuller, Murphy, Norquist, and Mitchell documented that the desegregation plan:

- **Intentionally** gave white parents more and better alternatives than African Americans;
- **Intentionally** limited the number of whites who were bused involuntarily; and
- **Intentionally** placed the greatest burden of busing on African Americans.

An ironic aspect is that about 19 schools were excluded from this plan, and thus were allowed to remained virtually 100% African American. By the logic of the overall plan, that was the educational equivalent of throwing these children overboard.

"WHITE BENEFIT"

As for placing the disproportionate burden of desegregation on African Americans, the plan's rationale was explicit. According to MPS, "**...the psychological guarantee of not having to attend a school that is predominantly minority will tend to stabilize the population in the city**" (Fuller, 1985). Describing the plan, William Kritek discussed the "optimum percentage of minority students in a desegregated school." He said: "[Fifteen] per cent is a minimum if the minority group is...to exert pressure without constituting a power threat to the majority." He quoted another educator: "[A]s long as the proportion of black pupils is small...and expected to remain so, there is no reason for white pupils to experience stigma, relative deprivation, social threat, marginality, or a change in norms, standards, or...expectations of their significant others" (1977).

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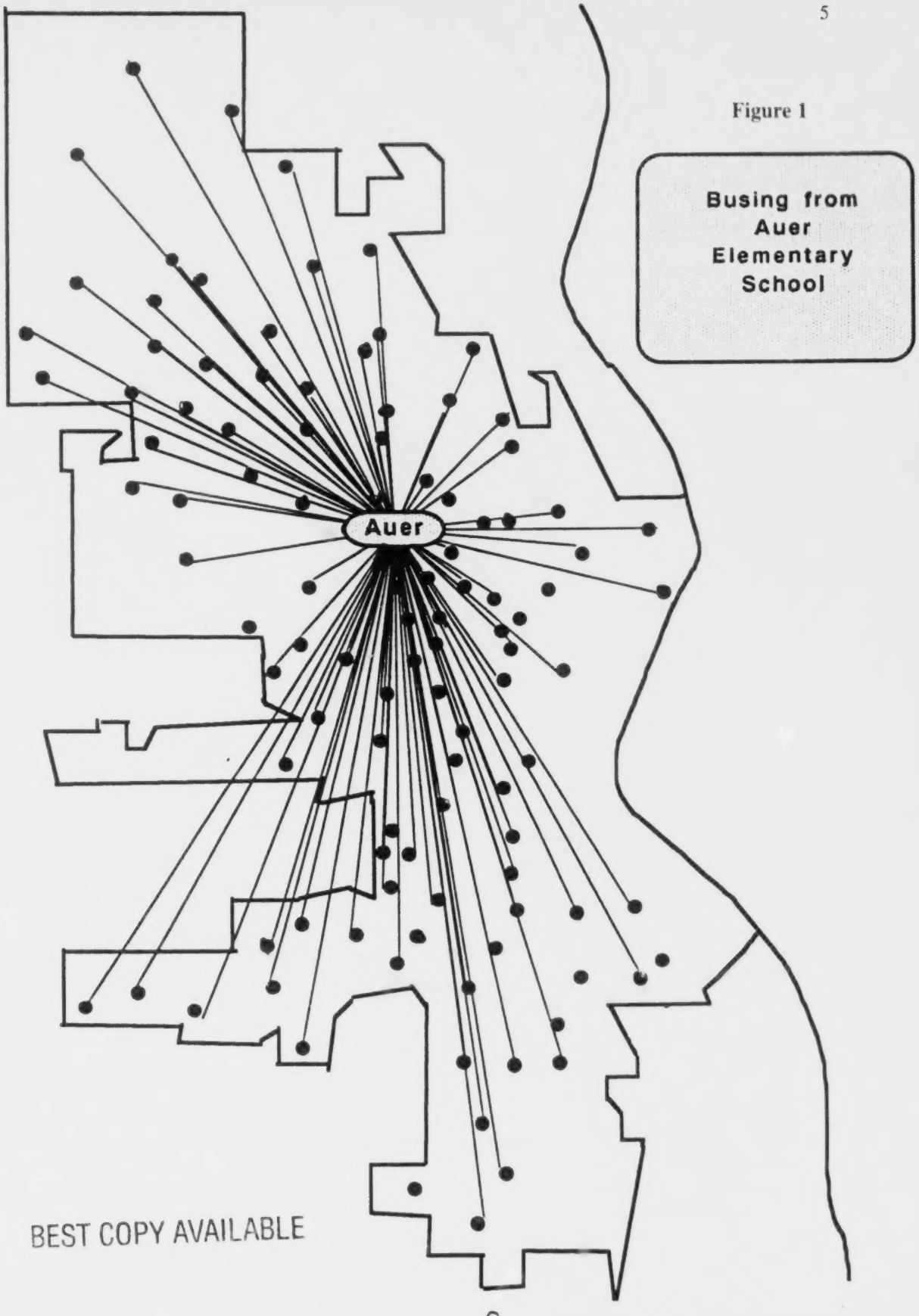
Figure 1



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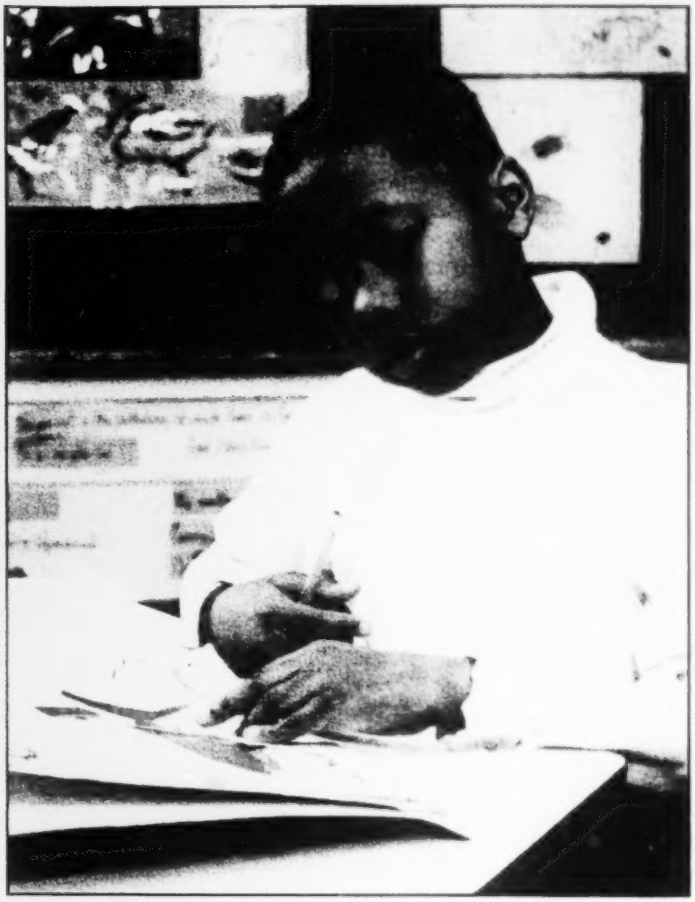

This was the offensive racial prism through which "equal educational opportunity" for African American children was viewed. The supposed era of racial integration in Milwaukee instead became a period of forced busing and cover-up of the lack of academic achievement by African American children. While some African Americans truly received more power to choose, they were outnumbered by those forced to "choose," based mainly on their race, from a small number of distant schools. All the while, a larger proportion of white students either stayed in neighborhood schools or transferred to "magnet" schools, many of which had selective admission practices.

It was not until 1999 that one of this plan's architects acknowledged that the unequal outcome **was not accidental**. The occasion was a forum at The Helen Bader Foundation, part of a series of events aimed at discussing race relations in Milwaukee. A former senior MPS administrator said that "**white benefit**" was a central consideration in the plan's development. After this news circulated in the community for a few days, it prompted a page one story ("'White benefit' was driving force of busing") in the October 19, 1999 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

"AT OR ABOVE AVERAGE"

The long-submerged "white benefit" story shows how truth has been a casualty in the struggle of Milwaukee African Americans for expanded educational opportunity and improved educational achievement for their children.

Another example involves claims about academic achievement of African American students. In the early 1980s, MPS lulled a gullible media into believing that a majority of its students scored "at or above average" on standardized tests. This reinforced the idea that forced busing was having a positive impact, including on African American students.

In 1984, Governor Anthony Earl and Herbert Grover, elected superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction, created an independent task force to study the issue. Countering the rosy scenario portrayed by MPS, after an 18-month study, the task force identified an "unacceptable disparity in educational opportunity and achievement between poor and minority children...and non-poor and white children..." It determined that MPS classified students "at or above average" even if they scored substantially below the 50th percentile. African American test scores were *well below* the 50th percentile in almost all grades and almost all subjects (Study Commission, 1985).

TAX-SUPPORTED SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Such findings contributed to an emerging view in Milwaukee that mandatory busing had left many low-income, African American students behind. This focused attention on the meager educational alternatives actually available to most low-income, mostly African American parents.

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This broadened awareness of the educational crisis among African American students was far from news within the African American community. Beginning in the 1960s, Mikel Holt traces growing discontent among African Americans with unacceptable educational achievement of African American students. Discontent grew in the late 1970s, once it was clear that the court-ordered integration plan placed a disproportionate, involuntary burden on African American students (2000).

In the 1980s, disaffected African American parents sought and found new allies in their quest for real power, power that would enable them to be more effective in the fight for their children's education (Susan Mitchell, 1999). A broader coalition supported enactment, in 1990, of a voucher program enabling a limited number of low-income Milwaukee parents to enroll their children in non religious private schools. Sponsored by Representative Polly Williams and Governor Tommy Thompson, this program — the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) — sought **more options for poor parents, better achievement for their children, and improved performance in MPS**.

The MPCP gave low-income parents an inkling of the broader power long valued by more affluent parents. First in Milwaukee, and later in Cleveland and Florida, the result has been more educational options for a small but growing number of low-income, mostly African American parents. In other locations, privately financed scholarships provide still more educational choices for many additional parents, including a significant number of low-income African Americans.

African American support for vouchers has grown in tandem with their concern about the failure of public schools. For example, "[a]mong African Americans, support for school vouchers in the 1999 survey shows a 25 percent increase...from last year....A substantial majority of the black respondents (60 percent) supported school vouchers, while only a third...rejected them" (Joint Center, 1999).

When the Supreme Court decides whether low-income African Americans and other eligible parents may choose from non religious and religious schools as part of such programs, its decision initially will affect thousands of children in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. But, the real impact will be on millions of similarly situated students and families throughout the country. It is no understatement to say that the decision will influence the direction of urban education reform throughout America. If the Supreme Court says "**YES**," the movement can shift into forward gear. If the answer is "**NO**," we will face even more formidable obstacles than is now the case.

To grasp the potential of vouchers for low-income parents, consider that the initial MPCP limited participation to only 1% — about 1,000 students — of MPS enrollment. **Yet, according to the 1990 census, an estimated 64,000 children in Milwaukee lived in families that met the program's low-income eligibility guidelines** (Fuller and White, 1995). Viewed in a national context, these census data suggest that millions of low-income, mostly African American families have a stake in the decision that is eventually handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court.

EXPANSION OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN MILWAUKEE

During Wisconsin's 1994 elections, a bipartisan coalition of parents, employers, and civic leaders urged candidates to expand the MPCP. They said more students should be allowed to participate and that parents should be able to choose both non religious and religious schools.[2] The urgency of their cause was demonstrated the following year, when an in-depth report called MPS a system where the "status quo, not kids, comes first." It said "the district's distressing overall performance" was evident from an overall high school grade point average of 1.64 and a large "disparity in academic performance between white and black students..." (*The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 1995) Thus, a full decade after the 1984-85 study commission, another generation of students had come and gone and there was little progress to show.

In early 1995, Governor Thompson proposed a major expansion of the MPCP. He recommended that all low-income children in MPS be allowed to participate and to choose religious as well as non religious schools. The legislature passed many elements of his plan, though it capped participation at 15% of MPS enrollment, or nearly 16,000 students.

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OPPOSITION

Immediately after Thompson signed the 1995 expansion, teachers unions and others sued. A Wisconsin court injunction blocked the expansion, placing thousands of children in limbo until a private fundraising drive, under the auspices of Partners Advancing Values in Education (PAVE), came to the rescue.

The injunction and three-year court battle typifies the environment of hostility and uncertainty for expanded school choice in Milwaukee that opponents have generated. Beginning in 1990, with an unsuccessful teachers union lawsuit, they have pursued multiple legislative, regulatory, and legal strategies to keep low-income parents from having the power to make educational choices for their children. In the case of the 1995 lawsuit, it was not until 1998 that the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld all aspects of the new law. In the intervening period, the private PAVE program became the educational lifeboat for thousands of children who otherwise would have been stranded by the injunction.

Despite repeated obstacles that voucher opponents have attempted to erect, and resulting uncertainty about the MPCP's future, parent interest has grown steadily. MPCP participation has increased from 300 in 1990-91 to 7,996 in 1999-00 (Legislative Audit Bureau — LAB — 2000). Eighty-one percent of participating families are from minority groups (62% African American, 19% Hispanic, Asian, and other).

LIES

In addition to pursuing legislative, regulatory, and legal obstacles, voucher opponents routinely make false claims about how the Milwaukee program operates and claim that research on it shows no favorable impact. For example, against such claims, consider the following findings from peer-reviewed research.

- "The demographic profile [of MPCP students] was quite consistent over each of the [first] five years...[S]tudents who ultimately enrolled...were from very low-income families, considerably below the average [Milwaukee Public Schools — MPS] family and about $500 below the low-income (free-lunch-eligible) MPS family...Blacks and Hispanics were the primary applicants...both being over represented compared with [MPS]...Choice students were considerably less likely to come from a household in which parents were married...Prior test scores of Choice students [showed they] were achieving considerably less than MPS students and somewhat less than low-income MPS students" (Witte, 1995). [3]
- "...[T]here was evidence that Choice parents were very dissatisfied with their former (MPS) schools; there may have been good reason for it, as indicated by test scores taken in MPS prior to students enrolling in Choice...[The] judgment of Choice parents of their child's prior public school was especially harsh in contrast with the MPS control groups...Satisfaction of Choice parents with private schools was just as dramatic as dissatisfaction was with prior public schools...The results were a dramatic reversal — high levels of dissatisfaction with prior public schools, but considerable satisfaction with private schools...There was also, in each year, overwhelming support among participants that the Choice program should continue...Finally, parental involvement, which was clearly very high for Choice parents before they enrolled in the program, increased while their children were in private schools" (Witte, 1995).
- "The general conclusion is that there is no substantial difference over the life of the program between the Choice and MPS students....On a positive note, estimates for the overall samples, while always below national norms, do not substantially decline as the students enter higher grades. This is not the normal pattern in that usually urban student average scores decline relative to national norms in higher grades..." (Witte, 1995.).

Two other teams analyzed Witte's data and found more positive results.

- Princeton economist Cecilia Elena Rouse, in Harvard's *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, said that ". . .being selected to participate in the choice program appears to have increased the math achievement of low-income, minority students by 1.5-2.3 percentile points per year" (1998).
- Separately, scholars at Harvard and the University of Texas found statistically significant gains in math and reading for children in the Milwaukee choice program at least three years. First released in a book published by The Brookings Institution, the findings were later published in *Education and Urban Society* (Greene, et.al., 1998 and 1999).

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Opponents of choice have used differences in test score estimates to cloud the school choice debate and obscure positive results: Yet, there is no dispute that:

- The MPCP has successfully encouraged and empowered urban parents to make major decisions about their children's education.
- It substantially increased the involvement and satisfaction of these parents in their children's schooling. For example, *Education Week* reported that:

  "...the Milwaukee choice plan has...deeply involved long-alienated parents in their children's schooling. This is of crucial importance, standing as a powerful retort to educators who have long suggested that parents burdened by social and economic problems could devote but minimal attention to educational issues...If choice parents were largely invisible in their old public schools, they are visible everywhere in their new schools — in the corridors, in the office, and even in the classroom, where they sometimes work as aides" (Ruenzel, 1995).

- At a minimum, students did not experience a decline in achievement, something that usually occurs as minority students "progress" to higher grades.

A range of other distortions and falsehoods continue to permeate the debate about school choice. Three common claims, as applied to Milwaukee's program, are that choice has "drastically cut" public school spending, worsened racial segregation, and excluded children with special education needs. The new LAB audit refuted such assertions, justifying a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* headline: "Audit Dispels Choice Myths." Three earlier studies that I co-authored with George Mitchell also detail errors in such claims (Fuller and Mitchell, 1999 and 2000).

THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE

Critical events are occurring now, outside legislative and judicial halls, in the court of public opinion. Opponents of expanded choice are trying energetically to shape public opinion and news media coverage in a way that will influence legislators and judges alike. Many use a hardball, win-at-any-cost campaign premised on lies and misinformation. Unless it is countered, it might succeed. Thus, the coming months could be one of the most important periods **ever** in the African American struggle for equal educational opportunity. If we stand by silently as our opponents misrepresent the issue and misinform the public, the defeat that could follow will be deserved.

While the nation's African American community does not need to be of one mind, the future of our children requires **an open discussion, focusing on the core issue: the urgent need to expand the educational power of low-income, African American parents**.

The history described in this paper shows how our community and its children suffer when we lack the power to make educational choices, and when the range of those choices is controlled by anyone other than parents.

When some public school educators and their supporters argue that choice will hurt African American children, it is important to recognize how many of these same educators feel about the systems in which they work. It is also important to see how they use their power to decide where their own children go to school. For example, consider the findings in a 1987 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee survey, described as follows by the May 12, 1987 edition of *The Milwaukee Sentinel*:

> "Fewer than 40% of Milwaukee Public School teachers responding to a poll question said they would be satisfied to have their own children attend the school where they teach. In response to another question, 38%...of MPS teachers said they would be hard-pressed to give the city school system a grade any higher than 'D' or 'F'."

More recently, Fuller and White showed that while a third of teachers in Milwaukee choose private schools for their children, the lower income in many African American families explains why only six percent of African American parents chose private schools (1995).

This Milwaukee story is not unique. Millions of American parents of all political persuasions — Republicans, Democrats, and independents — beginning with those at the very top of our government, benefit from the power of educational alternatives. While 14% of school age children are in private school, that rate is 34% and 50%, respectively, for the children of Congressmen and Senators (Shokraii, 1997). I support the decision these parents have made to exercise **their rightful power** to select the school they feel is best for their children. For example, President Clinton and Vice President Gore attended private school and enrolled their children in private schools. **Why is this power, so highly valued and widely used by many of our government's top leaders, so controversial when applied to low-income, mostly African American parents?**

CONCLUSION — POWERFUL GUIDANCE

Sara Lightfoot (1980) said that "a critically important ingredient of educational success...lies in the power relationship between communities and schools, rather than in the nature of the student population." She continued, in comments that would apply well to the history of educational options in Milwaukee: "Mixing black and white bodies...in the same school and preserving the same relationships and perceptions between the schools and the families they serve is unlikely to substantially change...the quality of the educational process." In words that speak directly to the need for expanded educational alternatives, she said: "The nature and distribution of power among schools, families and communities is a crucial piece of the complex puzzle leading toward educational success of all children."

Kenneth B. Clark is one of this century's most distinguished African American leaders. Three decades ago, long before "school choice" was the trendy and controversial topic it has become today, he wrote forcefully of the need for expanded educational alternatives. Clark (1968) said such alternatives would only arise if "competitive public school systems" replaced the public "education monopoly." He added that "truly effective competition [i.e., more educational alternatives for parents] strengthens rather than weakens that which deserves to survive...[P]ublic education need not be identified with the present system...of public schools. [It] can be more broadly and pragmatically defined in terms of...an educational system which is in the public interest."

The words of Lightfoot and Clark provide powerful guidance. African Americans must continue to organize and act decisively to attain the power to make educational choices that are best for our children. They must be inspired by — and never forget — the clear and powerful words of Milwaukee's Val Johnson:

"I think I know what's best for my children. Yes, I do."

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NOTES

1. For decades there has been a myriad of tax-supported and privately endowed programs for students attending public and private colleges. In addition, middle and upper income parents have always had the resources to exercise K-12 choice. What has changed is the more recent development of K-12 choice as a meaningful option for low-income parents. While state supreme courts in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Arizona have upheld the constitutionality of programs involving private and religious schools, a federal court in Ohio has disagreed with the Ohio Supreme Court and struck down Cleveland's voucher program as unconstitutional. This decision is being appealed. At some point in the near future, the U. S. Supreme Court will have to resolve this conflict. The Court in recent cases has suggested that educational assistance programs are constitutional if they treat religious and non religious options neutrally and if funds are directed by the private choices of individual parents.

2. The coalition included:
   - Parents for School Choice, an organization of low-income, mostly minority Milwaukee parents. A survey of black Milwaukeeans showed 71% supported the right to choose religious as well as non-sectarian schools (White, 1995).
   - The Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce (MMAC), a business organization of about 2,500 employers. A 1994 member survey of found that 76% favored school choice.
   - Democratic Mayor John Norquist, who believes that school choice leads to the high quality education critical to the life of a city. In a 1988 campaign position paper, Norquist had documented the unequal impact on African Americans of the MPS race-based assignment system. A later article in *Reader's Digest* had helped bring national attention to the pioneering choice effort (Norquist and McGroarty, 1993).
   - Business and civic leaders, who had founded a private scholarship program called PAVE (Partners Advancing Values in Education). PAVE became the largest program of its kind in the United States, providing a critical bridge of support for low-income students while opponents tried to kill choice in court.
   - Other community activists such as John Gardner, a former labor organizer who has twice been elected, on a pro-school choice platform, to the citywide seat on the MPS school board.

3. John Witte is a University of Wisconsin political scientist who evaluated Milwaukee's program from 1991 to 1995. In a new book, he endorses targeted voucher programs such as the MPCP (Witte, 2000). Witte urges observers of this debate "to read [his] original reports" — see References.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE AND ITS DIRECTOR

The Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette Univesity was founded in 1995. It is supported by a wide range of foundations and individuals with a common interest in achieving major educational reform. The Institute's particular focus is on improving academic achievement in urban America. Its research activity concentrates on issues affecting the expansion of educational options for parents. The Institute actively works with public and private educators and institutions to increase the quality of educational options available in Milwaukee, in hopes that this will improve educational achievement there and serve as a model for similar efforts in other cities.

Howard Fuller, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Professor of Education at Marquette University, where he founded and directs the Institute. Fuller joined the Marquette faculty in 1995 after serving four years as Superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools. His career includes cabinet-level administrative positions for the State of Wisconsin and Milwaukee County. He earned a bachelor of science degree in sociology from Carroll College, a master's degree in social administration from Western Reserve University, and a doctorate in the sociological foundations of education from Marquette University.

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